WHERE DOES SUFFERING LEAD?
Psalm 35:2-5
Matthew 17:14-23
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People around the country are flocking to a movie which portrays the deep agony of the human condition. At the end of the movie the narrator describes this vision of humanity as the "butchered, betrayed, martyred children of the earth." Sophie's Choice is a confrontation with tragedy and death. Sophie lives with the horrors of Auschwitz and her own guilt. Her lover, Nathan, lives with the terror of madness. Together they try to survive in lives so full of scars that escape through fantasy is the only way to live with truth. The depth of their scars and the despair of their fantasies make this movie a powerful experience of the pathos of life. Living with suffering is synonymous with life. The scripture passages read this morning both express human conditions of which suffering is central. The personal anguish of the Psalmist crying "Fear and trembling came upon me and horror overwhelms me," and the desparation of the father bringing his epileptic son to Jesus for healing are life situations we can understand. Yet we do not really understand. We ask questions that can be neither answered nor dismissed. Why must we suffer? Does pain have meaning? Should one learn from suffering? Should one wish for herself or himself a life free from pain?

One scene in Sophie's Choice showed the narrator, a young aspiring author, asking Sophie about her past and anxious to understand her. He says of her suffered life, "I want to know the truth." To which Sophie replies, "The truth does not make it easier to understand."

Truth does not make it easier to understand the Passion Story of Jesus Christ. Yet the church tries to face the realities of pain and death during these pre-Reserrection days. Lent has traditionally been a period for penitence and confession in preparation for Easter. Madeleine L'Engle, in her book The Irrational Season has suggested that Lent is not the season to give up candy, chocolate, and soda pop. She points out that in a world where many live on the edge of starvation, 40 days of self-denial by overweight Americans should instead be 365 days of changed eating habits. She urges us to use Lent as a time for thinking about what we ordinarily avoid considering. I think she may mean seeing the crucifixion through the eyes of human suffering.

Most recently the question of suffering has been put in the form of a best selling book titled Why Bad Things Happen to Good People. After his three year old son was diagnosed as having a rare heart disease Rabbi Harold Kushner felt compelled to confront the age-old question.

Rabbi Kushner catalogues the many partial explanations that people have used then faced with suffering. They range from understanding suffering as a punishment for wrongdoing, to viewing the world as a tapestry which only God fully understands. In a lighthearted way, the goodness of God is challenged through the question: "Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include tooth decay in his divine system of creation?"

Ernest Campbell comments: "From the beginning the church has been made up of the non-descript. Even the Apostle Paul was forced to recognize that 'not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called': Ordinary people showing extraordinary commitment are the strength of our congregations. (Campbell's Notebook, Volume III, No. 1)

One of the perplexities of the Biblical story has to do with the qualifications of the people God always seems to have work for him. If not dull, in contemporary terms, they are quintessentially human. They are ordinary people. Thy mystery of election is how theology would describe it. How in the world did God end up choosing Israel of all nations? Why not a strong, well organized culture? Why not Egypt, Rome, or Greece? Or, as Old Testament scholars love to put it: "How odd of God to choose the Jews."

When you begin to ask the question from inside the Bible the incongruities multiply. Frederick Buechner calls the characters in the Bible "...this rag-bag of people..." Think of their almost embarrassing humanity and the fact that among all the things we believe about them the clearest and simplest is that in spite of the flaws God chose them for a particular purpose.

After all, Adam disobeys at the first opportunity, blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. Cain kills Abel; Lot's daughters give him too much wine and sleep with him; Noah gets publically drunk; Abraham gives his wife to Abimelich to save his own skin. Jacob deceives his elderly father and defrauds his brother; Moses is a murderer who can't speak very well in public; and their kings, later, are known more for their mediocrity and opportunism than for anything else except David. And David lusts, covets, schemes, commits adultery, then lies and murders to cover his tracks. David, someone said, could not have passed a simple test in morality.

Obviously there is something going on here which is different from the way we might evaluate, choose, and employ people to work for us. Obviously, being a celebrity doesn't count for much, nor does having all the personal characteristics to match the position description, nor does moral punity seem to put God off when he's making choices. St. Paul, it has been pointed out many times, would never make the first cut with a reasonable pulpit committee.

And then, behind these observations, there is a deeper assertion the Bible makes on several occasions. It is that God not only chooses ordinary human beings who are sometimes quite dull, are always terribly flawed, he also chooses some people who either do not care about him, oppose him, or deny that he exists. That is an idea which sounds acceptable enough until one begins to think about it a bit.

It is ordinarily associated with Isaiah, the prophet whose call to his vocation and his resounding "Here am I, send me." we read this morning. Isaiah heard the call of God and responded, strongly and immediately. His qualifications are not an issue. But later, this same Isaiah is found making a staggering assertion. It is in the tenth chapter...

"Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury;
against a Godless nation I send him..."

Apathy is a word that literally means non-suffering, freedom from suffering, a creature's inability to suffer. The facts of the story indicate the disciples were apathetic in the face of tragedy, we can identify. Our modern society is so dominated by the goal of avoiding suffering that it becomes a goal to avoid human relationships. I just mention the number of people who come to our churches in need and tell of the endless run-arounds they have had going from one welfare office to another.

The reality of their poverty has been lost in the bureaucracy. When one is unemployed, at the end of the economic rope, going from one agency to another means walking - walking from West Broad to East Broad to North High. Apathy! The prophet, Isaiah, put it this way, "The poor and needy seek water and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst."

I had an interesting conversation recently on this subject. I was on a flight from New York to Columbus. When I was seated on the plane I was delighted to find an empty seat beside me. I had brought some work to do and was anxious to have the seat to spread out my legal pad and books. I was preparing for a class I was teaching on "Suffering". My solitude was broken when the man on the aisle seat said something like, "You certainly are working hard on that." I must confess I wasn't anxious to socialize. The gentleman had other ideas. What was I teaching? Suffering -- how interesting He had a lot to say on the subject. More than I cared to listen to, quite frankly. He also had some ideas to which I couldn't subscribe. He said, "I believe only the weak suffer." Only the weak I thought, but isn't that all of us? He was adamant about that. He was a self-made man, on his way to Columbus to oversee two of his plants here. He never let things get him down. At this point my new friend was into his second scotch-on-the-rocks on our before-noon flight. Possibly one way to avoid suffering. One way to remain apathetic. Freedom from suffering is nothing other than a blindness that does not perceive suffering.

I recall Dorothy Soelle -- ask not from where does suffering come, but ask where does it lead. Jesus told the disciples, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you." He says "respond, do something, be compassionate enough to move mountains."

With polls down and demonstrations driving their point home it is hard to imagine that our nation can avoid the present sufferings of the poor in our country. Unemployment remains over 10%. When the hurt is so acute, we often laugh in place of crying. Such is the nature of the joke, "What's the difference between Cleveland and the Titanic?" "Cleveland has a better orchestra." As in most other big cities, young people, especially minorities are suffering disporportionately. Unemployment for minority young is now almost 53%.

Why is it so difficult to see the suffering and to work to alleviate epilepsies that drive nations into the fire and drown individuals in forgottenness?

And then, you begin to see the mystery in it all, and the fact that we are not talking about great skill and accomplishment. We are simply affirming that from outside, on occasion, comes the impetus, the inducement, the call and that all any of us can do is say yes to it whether we answer the call in ministry or as laity.

Artists - musicians - writers know about it. Human creativity is perhaps best described as an artist becoming a vehicle of the art which transcends his or her own being. Roman Catholic author Graham Greene has a fine sense of it. In his novel, The Power and the Glory, an alcoholic failure of a priest is the medium through which God's grace takes shape and becomes active. And Madeleine L'Engle writes:

> "Look at them! ordinary human beings, full of flaws, sins, humanness, but found by God...God always calls unqualified people. In cold reality no one is qualified..."

And then she tries for an answer to the puzzle in a way I found intriguing:

> "If God had chosen great kings, successful and wealthy merchants, wise men with their knowledge of the stars, it would be easy to think that these people, of their own virtue and understanding, accomplished on their own the blessing which God asked them to complete." (The Irrational Season, p. 100)

Does it mean that only the mediocre get in the kingdom? Or that if you are not poor, nondescript, and without influence God isn't interested in you? Of course not. It means that what God chooses you for is probably not what you would choose you for. It means that discovery all of us more-or-less make, namely, that God has chosen us and called us and it has had nothing to do with any deserving on our part. It means that he sometimes chooses the small to carry the heaviest burden. It means that God chooses the successful banker sometimes to be gentle and compassionate, and the nurse to be tough. It means that in his infinite wisdom God chooses us to do what he knows we can do best and what, now and then, we can see we needed to do for our own wholeness and integrity.

That's the adventure of it, of course. It is why ordinary people become extraordinary saints in the Bible. It is the invitation and challenge of discipleship in every age. Your life has a purpose. You may not always see it clearly. But the testimony of God's people is there is purpose for each of us, a reason to be, tasks which God needs us to do. God has chosen you. In Jesus Christ he has called you. The adventure begins when you say "yes". AMEN.

We can't do anything?

The question is not can we avoid suffering, but where does sufering lead? Our suffering led Jesus Christ to love us enough to die for us. For the young author in Sophie's Choice, whose first desire was to pack and leave, suffering led to great love and devotion to his two friends. He endured rage, mocking, rejection, and much pain. His love was tangible and concrete. It was love which enabled him to remain and at the end of the movie to express with hope that this was "not judgment day, but the morning, excellent and fair." His suffering led him into the brightness of a new day.

Jesus tells us through his dying love that nothing will be impossible to us. Our faith in him enables us to move mountains.

Lent is a good time to think the unthinkable and to listen to that which is easier not to hear. Lent means not avoiding, but facing the world as it is, as Jesus faced Jerusalem. Lent means being led by our own suffering and the suffering of others into a new life of love. We know life well enough to know that living involves pain. Some say it doesn't have to, that suffering can be avoided. We know better. We also know Jesus Christ, who suffers with us and leads us from death to living with passion for others.

In the name of our God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. AMEN.